

Wonju commander an officer, a gentleman and...a clown?

By F. Neil Neeley

Area III PAO

USAG HUMPHREYS—If you were walking around Wonju Enclave you might hear “Hey buddy! I hear that your commander is a real clown!”

“Yeah, you’re right,” might be the reply but neither Soldier could be found guilty of contempt or disrespect.

That’s because their commander, Maj. Bruce L. Townley, is not only a professional clown, he might be the only graduate of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus’s Clown College in the United States Army.

Townley has been clowning around since his enlisted days in the Navy.

“I reported onboard my first ship, the battleship USS New Jersey in 1987,” Townley said. “At my indoctrination briefing a chaplain’s assistant came in and talked about a clown troupe that they had. ‘I thought that sounded kind of neat, so I joined them.’”

Townley said that the chaplain’s clown troupe averaged about eight members and didn’t have a religious message attached.

“It was only about entertainment and was just a good neighbor relations project,” he said.

Within a year of joining the troupe Townley became the director and started organizing the troupe’s events.

“We visited hospitals, orphanages and convalescent homes in every port that we went into,” Townley said. “And sometimes we performed in

parades. They were all volunteer events.

After three years of clowning for the Navy, Townley decided to turn pro. When his Navy enlistment was up in June of 1990, he decided to join the circus.

The week before he got out of the Navy Townley went to Alameda County, Calif. where the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus was performing.

“I auditioned with the clowns that were touring with them for a chance at one of 32 places in the 1990 class of the Ringling Brother’s Clown College,” he said.

Townley explained that everywhere the circus performed they auditioned clowns for a place in the once-a-year class.

That was the last audition for the 1990 class and, although Townley didn’t know it, all 32 places for that year’s class were already been taken.

“But they took my audition tape and packet and put it in for a chance at the 1991 class,” he said.

The next stop for the circus was Long Beach, Calif. and Townley wasn’t taking any chances.

“I waited a week after I got off active duty and made the first audition there for the 1991 class,” he said. “So I actually had two auditions for the 1991 class.”

Townley wasn’t to learn of the circus’s decision for another year. He went back home to Jefferson City, Mo. and managed the family farm until the next semester of college began and he could enroll. That was in January of 1991.

“Sometime in the summer of 1991 I got a call telling me that I had been selected.

“I don’t know why they accepted me out of all of the thousands of other people that auditioned,” Townley said. “They base their selection on raw talent, but it might have helped my chances that I auditioned twice. Perhaps it showed my enthusiasm.”

Other than airfare and some personal expenses, the eight week class in Venice, Fla. was free.

“The circus picked up most of the tab for the school,” Townley said. “The circus even provided a free custom-designed clown outfit completed with oversized clown’s shoes.

“They did that because they were training potential circus clowns to perform in their shows.”

Part of my contract with them was that if I were selected to join the circus,

then I had a one-year commitment to travel with them. That promise was the payment for my training and the free costume.

Townley flew to Venice that fall to join his class mates.

“Our normal day included physical warm-ups and acrobatics,” Townley said. “We had classes in makeup, unicycle, pantomime, improvisation, gag development, character development, costume design, and we would write our own skits. We did many of the gags that they had done in the circus in the past years.

“It was a stressful school in that we worked hard from eight in the morning until ten at night six days a week,” Townley said. “We also came in on Sunday afternoons and worked on our skits. It was very active but we had fun. Anytime we had a break we were playing games or juggling, unicycling or walking on stilts.”

Townley and his class performed a free show for a live audience on Saturday evenings.

“That way, we could see what worked and what didn’t,” he said.

At the end of school Townley’s class had a professional performance for the vice president for entertainment and other officials with Ringling Brothers.

“They accepted 11 to tour with the circus,” Townley said. “The others were sent home.”

Ringling Brothers did not select Townley but he wasn’t disappointed.

“I had already planned my life,” he said. “I was attending college in Missouri and wanted to graduate.”

Townley explained that touring with the circus is like going to the field every day and would have really disrupted his life.

“I had already been away from home with the Navy for four years so I was ready to settle down a little bit and not be on the road.”

Being a graduate of The Ringling School proved to be an enormous boost to Townley’s clown business back in Missouri.

“Being able to advertise as a Ringling Brothers clown was huge to me,” he said, “because the credibility behind it is enormous.”

Townley credits clowning for paying his own and his wife’s way through college.

The media picked me up heavily when I first got back to Jefferson City. I didn’t need to advertise, it was all word of mouth.

“I was doing kids’ birthday parties, conventions, fall festivals, county fairs,



F. NEIL NEELEY

Maj. Townley loves to juggle. “I’ll even juggle Bread,” he said.

the Rotary Club, churches, you name it,” he said. “Anyone that needed entertainment I did it. I’d do two or three shows a day. My weekends were packed. I’d go to school during the week and do shows in the evening and shows during the day even.”

Townley joined Army ROTC in college as was commissioned when he graduated in December of 1995.

For a time he balanced the two careers; clowning and the military, “But the Army won out because it kept me more involved,” he said. “I knew from the beginning when I enlisted in the Navy in 1986 that I was going to be a lifer. I couldn’t pass up that 20 year retirement.”

“I have about five more years of active time before I retire. After retirement, I plan on starting my own entertainment business,” he said.

Townley has a large family; five kids and is in the process of adopting more. “I’m working on my own clown troupe,” he said. “I want to start my own family business and involve my children.”

Townley still does the magic and the juggling but he doesn’t put on the makeup as often because it takes so much time and effort.

“I love to juggle,” he said. I’ll juggle bread if I have to. Whatever’s available, I’ll pick up and juggle.”

How do Townley’s peers see him as an officer and a clown?

“I guess that there are mixed emotions,” he said. “I’m about accomplishing the mission, so I hope that no one thinks that I’m not taking my job seriously. I do have a different take than a lot of officers in the way that I approach things. Is it right or wrong? I don’t know.”



Wonju Enclave Commander Maj. Bruce L. Townley dressed in his clown suit.